

FOREST SERVICE WINTER TRAVEL MANAGEMENT

BRINGING **BALANCE** TO THE BACKCOUNTRY



In 2013 a federal court ruled that the Forest Service has an obligation to manage snowmobiles under the same guidelines used for all other off-road vehicles in other seasons. The court ruled that the exemption of over-snow vehicles (OSVs) in the 2005 Travel Management Rule was unlawful and it directed the Agency to develop a new rule outlining the process under which each National Forest will create a winter travel plan to complement their existing summer travel management plans. This new rule, which was published in January 2015, represents an opportunity to bring balance to the winter backcountry by providing a framework for local stakeholders, communities, and the Forest Service to work together to find balanced solutions for winter use. What comes next varies from forest to forest so please get in touch with us to find out more about winter travel planning in your local area.

Background

Forest Service lands are home to some of the nation's most iconic winter backcountry destinations, from the accessible terrain and abundant snowfall of Teton Pass or the Wasatch Range, to the remote challenge of Alaska and the high Sierra, with family-friendly cross-country ski and snowshoe trails in between. Each year, millions of Americans visit these public lands for the unique experience of moving under one's own power through the winter landscape. Forest Service lands are managed under a multiple use mandate, which means other types of winter recreation – like developed ski areas and snowmobiling – are appropriate uses of the land as well. But this does not mean that all uses are compatible in all places. For example where crowding, safety, noise and other factors create a situation where one use dominates and degrades the experience sought by other user groups it is appropriate to designate specific areas for motorized and non-motorized use.

Developing management plans for where winter motorized use is appropriate will go a long way towards ensuring that all who recreate in the winter backcountry can enjoy the solitude, sense of adventure, and connection to the landscape they seek.

The Over-Snow Vehicle Rule

The 2005 Travel Management Rule marked a fundamental shift in how the Forest Service manages motorized recreation. However, this rule left management of snowmobiles as optional and only a handful of forests developed comprehensive plans for managing winter motorized use. The 2015 Over-Snow Vehicle Rule amends Subpart C of the 2005 Rule to require that National Forests which receive enough snowfall for OSV use to occur designate routes and areas where OSV use is allowed.

Once a Forest or Ranger District has designated routes and areas for OSV use then they must publish these designations on an OSV Use Map. Upon publication of the OSV Use Map, OSV use that is inconsistent with the designations shown on the map will be prohibited. This means those areas not designated as open to OSVs are protected for their ecological values and non-motorized activities.

Unfortunately the OSV rule contains two troubling loopholes that may allow forests to sidestep the intent of travel management planning. It allows an "area" designated for snowmobile use to be as large as an entire Ranger District and for past management decisions to be incorporated into new travel plans without opportunities for public comment, regardless of how out-of-date they may be.

Through winter travel planning WWA and our members will advocate to protect sensitive winter wild lands and areas that are important for human-powered recreation. We look forward to working through implementation of the OSV Rule with all stakeholders. This is the time for all of us who enjoy human-powered activities such as backcountry and Nordic skiing, snowshoeing, snowboarding and winter mountaineering to speak up for the places, and experiences we value.

The Opportunity

This new planning process represents a huge opportunity to bring balance to our national forests, and now is your chance to help shape the future of where you ski and ride. For the first time ever, National Forests where YOU play are required to implement winter travel management plans. Helping the Forest Service draft these plans will be YOUR opportunity to influence how YOUR backcountry is managed.

By stepping back and re-assessing where on the landscape motorized use is truly appropriate, the Forest Service and those who participate in the winter travel planning process will be able to take steps to reduce user conflicts and ensure that high quality winter recreation opportunities exist for all users.

While there are abundant opportunities for quiet and solitude deep in the backcountry, fewer opportunities exist for non-motorized winter recreation closer to home. Creation of sizable winter non-motorized areas on each National Forest, with enforceable common sense boundaries, would go a long way towards meeting the public's desire in this regard and reducing user conflict, and we will work to see these zones are created or protected so that skiers, snowboarders, snowshoers and other human-powered winter recreationists can have the experience that they seek.

This is an opportunity for all those who value the winter backcountry to find common ground. We all want room to roam – and the backcountry is big enough for all of us – but we cannot afford a free-for-all.



Get Involved

Winter Wildlands Alliance will be very involved in the development of winter travel plans, but we can't do this alone. We need your voice, speaking up for balance in the backcountry. Stay involved by signing-up for our action alerts, becoming a member of Winter Wildlands Alliance, and connecting with a grassroots group near you. Visit winterwildlands.org/take-action/ to learn more.



Questions?

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Winter Wildlands Alliance is a national non-profit organization dedicated to promoting winter wildlands and a quality human powered snowsports experience on public lands.